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GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Why We Baptize Infants

by

ALBERTUS PIETERS, V.D.M.
HOLLAND, MICH.

Second Edition

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WHY WE BAPTIZE INFANTS

A Paper Read Before the Western Social Conference of the Reformed Church in America, at Holland, Michigan, January 21st, 1929, by Albertus Pieters, V.D.M., Dosker-Hulswit Professor of English Bible and Missions in the Western Theological Seminary.

Why We Baptize Infants

THE question of infant baptism is of perennial interest. Each generation of Christians, as it appears upon the scene, asks the same question: "Why do ye these things?" and each is entitled to an answer.

This paper is intended to furnish such an answer. The reader is requested to note the way in which we put the query. We do not say: "Why should we baptize infants?" as if we were not yet doing it; but, "Why do we?" We deal with a fact, an already existing institution. This institution may fairly be presumed to have a right of existence in the Christian church, which right we now propose to submit to a careful examination. There are three reasons why we baptize infants:

(1) Because infant baptism is an historic Christian practice;

(2) Because it is a scriptural practice;

(3) Because it is an edifying practice.

I. INFANT BAPTISM IS A CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

It is at present the rule with all of the 500,000,000 professing Christians in the world, except the various Baptist bodies in this country and elsewhere. I have no exact figures at hand, but, as nearly as I can determine, the Baptist population of the world may be something like 30,000,000. What is practiced and regarded as a most important religious ceremony by nearly 95% of all Christians in the world, may fairly be called a Christian practice.

Christian history testifies to the fact that it has always been so. We will quote a Baptist authority in support of

this statement. Dr. Albert Henry Newman, in a book entitled: *A History of Anti-Pedo-Baptism,* written from a Baptist standpoint, and published by the Baptist Publication Society, says:

> "If the apostolic churches were Baptist churches (which, of course, he assumes, but without proof) the churches of the second century were not. Still less, those of the third and following centuries" (p. 3). And again: "Not until the twelfth century do we encounter Christian doctrine and practice that we can with confidence recognize as measurably conformable to the apostolic standards" (p. 31).

By this he means doctrine and practice that rejected infant baptism; which he again assumes (although that remains to be proven) did not exist in apostolic Christianity.

The evidence of the church fathers abundantly confirms the statement that the church of the second and succeeding centuries was not a Baptist church. The great church father Irenaeus, very close to the apostles, being a pupil of Polycarp, who was a pupil of the apostle John, speaks about men being "born again unto God" in infancy. In another place he connects this regeneration with baptism, so that it is generally conceded by scholars that in the first statement we have proof of the very early existence of infant baptism.

The same thing is inferred, although somewhat doubtfully, from an expression by Justin Martyr, who died probably in 166 A. D. He says there were people "who were made disciples sixty years ago" and were still living. If, as is probable, this being "made disciples" includes the idea that they were baptized, this brings infant baptism back to the year 100, very close to the apostolic age, or soon after the death of the last of the apostles.

Whatever may be the correct interpretation of the words of Irenaeus and Justice Martyr, however, all doubt is gone by the time we reach Tertullian and Origen. The former was born about the year 150 A. D., and wrote a treatise on baptism, in which he takes the ground that sins committed after baptism are particularly dangerous. Hence, even for adults it is advisable to be baptized as late as possible. He says:

> "And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. . . . The Lord does, indeed, say: 'Forbid them not to come unto me.' Let them come, then, while they are growing up. Let them come while they are learning; while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins?"

Tertullian evidently was not "Reformed" or scriptural in his conception of original sin, or he would not have spoken of little children as innocent and needing no forgiveness. His argument is especially interesting as showing that the words of our Lord:

> "Suffer the little children to come unto me; forbid them not: for to such belongeth the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14).

were already in the time of Tertullian employed as an argument for infant baptism. It is also important to note that although he does not favor infant baptism, he does not allege that it was a recently introduced custom, or without proper authority. The two reasons he gives against infant baptism, that sins committed after baptism can not be forgiven, and that children are without sin, would not be approved by evangelical Baptists today. The reason *they* give, that it is not in accordance with apostolic doctrine to baptize the little children, appears not to have occurred to Tertullian.

Neither, so far as the records go, did it ever occur to any one else in the early church. No one except Tertullian objects to it in any way, no one says it is an innovation, no one thinks it is contrary to the true meaning of the sacrament, no one says it is not apostolic. It is, according to the above Baptist authority, more than a thousand years before any such voice is heard in the church.

The next great church father to testify is Origen of Alexandria, who was without question the best informed Christian of his day. He was born in 185 A. D., *and was himself baptized in infancy.* In his Commentary on the

Epistle to the Romans, according to the *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia,* he says:

> "The church has received the tradition from the apostles, to give baptism to little children."

He also speaks of infant baptism as "a custom of the church."

This testimony of Origen's is decisive. He lived at the center of early Christianity, and had resided for a time in Palestine. When he says that the practice of infant baptism was received from the apostles, it is not likely that he is mistaken about it.

Cyprian was a pupil of Tertullian and was Bishop of Carthage, in Northern Africa. In the year 253 he held a council, at which sixty-six Bishops were present. One of the subjects discussed was infant baptism, but not whether it was right, or scriptural, or apostolic—far from it! The subject discussed was whether it was necessary to wait until the baby was a week old! A letter had come from a country bishop named Fidus, who asked the advice of the Council. The letter they wrote to him is still extant, and may be found in Wall, on *Infant Baptism,* p. 102. They quote from his letter to them, and it seems that he thought

> "that they must not be baptized within two or three days after they are born; and that the rule of circumcision is to be observed, so that none should be baptized and sanctified before the eighth day after he is born."

The bishops disagree, and unanimously declare that baptism is proper before the eighth day.

The discussion makes it clear that by the year 253 after the birth of Christ, infant baptism was the unchallenged practice of the Christian church in Africa, and that, in the minds of Christian bishops, it was related in meaning to circumcision.

We need not go further down the centuries, for the evidence is unbroken from that time on. What has been adduced suffices to prove that infant baptism existed in the sub-apostolic church, and that it was believed by well-informed persons to have been instituted by the apostles.

There are two things, however, that must in fairness be mentioned on the other side. The first of these is that infant baptism is not mentioned in the *Didache,* or "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," and the other is that a good many of the early Christians did not practice infant baptism, although others did. The *Didache,* was written about 125-150 A. D., and is a church manual, giving directions how to carry on the service and administer the sacraments. It says, for instance, about baptism, that it should be by immersion, in running water, but that, if there is not water enough, it may be administered by pouring. In such a manual we should expect directions for infant baptism also, if it was then a practice; but there is no mention of it.

As to there being numerous early Christians who did not have their children baptized, Dr. J. C. Lambert, in *The Sacraments in the New Testament,* says:

> "During the fourth century pious Christian people, and even office-bearers in the Church, appear to have felt themselves under no obligation to have their children baptized. Gregory Nazianzen was the son of a bishop, while his mother was the devout and zealous Nonna. The grandparents of Basil the Great, as well as his parents, were earnest Christians, and his mother Emmilia was a woman of such noted piety that she was afterwards canonized. Chrysostom was the son of the saintly Anthusa, and Augustine the son of the no less saintly Monica. And yet none of these distinguished fathers of the Church was baptized in childhood" (p. 209).

The evidence, taken as a whole, seems to justify the following conclusions: **That infant baptism began to be practiced, certainly not later than the sub-apostolic age, and probably in the apostolic age, without any direct command from the apostles, and without, at first, being adopted by all the churches, but arising spontaneously, and gaining ground gradually, until, by the year 250 A. D., it was the generally-accepted custom.**

From that day to this, in unbroken succession, infant baptism has been practiced in the Christian Church by all believers, with inconsiderable exception. From this early Christian custom, through this unbroken historical continuity of the church's life, we today get infant baptism. It is one of the marks of being in line with the "catholic apos-

tolic Christian faith." This is the first reason why we baptize infants.

The second reason is that this early Christian practice was a right practice, truly in harmony with the right understanding of the nature of baptism and of the position of children within the church.

II. INFANT BAPTISM IS A SCRIPTURAL PRACTICE

By this we do not mean that there is in the Holy Scripture any direct exhortation or command to baptize infants. There is not. If some intelligent being from Mars should come to visit our earth, and we should hand him a Bible, with the request to tell us what he found, he would learn of the general doctrines and some of the practices of the Christian religion without any other aid. He would find the Lord's Supper, the organization of the church, with elders and deacons, and adult baptism; but it is safe to say he would never get it into his head that little children should be baptized. He would not find infant baptism in the Bible, because it is not there, and can not be gotten out of the Bible.

The Christian church did not originate, however, by such a process of Bible study as this. The Christian church existed before the New Testament was written, and therefore did not come out of it. It is not like Mormonism, which had no history before Joseph Smith alleged that he had discovered the "Book of Mormon," engraved on golden plates. Neither is our knowledge of Christianity like our knowledge of the ancient Assyrian Empire, which we know only through the long-buried monuments and inscriptions. Our knowledge of the Christian religion is a living knowledge, derived by unbroken continuity of spiritual life from the holy apostles themselves. When we take the Bible in our hands and seek to understand it, we must do so in the light of that fact, not as if we were the first to find it, and had nothing to learn about the habits and ceremonies of true Christianity except from its pages. The Bible is entirely silent about infant baptism, either pro or con. We admit it. We do not profess to get infant baptism from

its pages. We do profess to justify infant baptism from its pages. That is a very different thing.

For the matter of that, infant baptism is not the only thing that is practiced in both Reformed and Baptist churches that can not be gotten directly from the Bible. In all of these churches the Lord's Supper is administered during the forenoon or afternoon as well as in the evening. Can you get that out of the Bible? Was not the original institution in the evening, and does not the very name of the sacrament, "The Lord's Supper," mean an evening meal? Where, then, do either the Baptists or we get the authority to celebrate it early in the day? Certainly not from the Bible. There is not a single case mentioned in the New Testament in which it was clearly celebrated during the forenoon. We get it from the continuous practice of the church, in which such early celebration very soon became the custom.

Again, in all of these churches women, as well as men, take part in the communion service. That is entirely right, of course, but it is not scriptural, in the sense of being directly taught or permitted in the Holy Scriptures. Originally only men were present, and there is no case of women communing in the New Testament. Such participation of the women is cerainly scriptural, however, in the wider sense of being in harmony with the general teachings of the New Testament as to the intent and nature of the sacrament.

Let us take one more illustration of the same principle. Both the Reformed and Baptist churches observe Sunday as the Lord's Day, the weekly day of rest from labor. The Seventh Day Baptists and Adventists, on the other hand, keep Saturday. They say to us: "Where do you find Sunday keeping in the Bible?" and we have to admit that it is not to be found there. We do find, to be sure, that the early Christians had their meetings on that day, but usually in the evening. For all we know from these passages, they may have been at work during the day St. Paul also instructs the Corinthian Christians to lay by, on that day, a special contribution, but it is not at all clear, and does not appear probable, that this involves a collection in a service for worship (I Corinthians 16:2). If to be "scriptural"

means only that the doctrine or practice so designated is directly commanded or taught in the Bible, then we must admit that Sunday-keeping is not scriptural. Where do we get it? Exactly where we get infant baptism, from the practice of the early church. Having gotten it in this way, we test it by the teaching of the Holy Scriptures with reference to the passing away of the Old Testament law and the coming in of a new covenant in Christ. This wider study of God's Word furnishes a very good ground for the acceptance of the Lord's Day instead of the Jewish sabbath. We see that the early church acted rightly, in harmony with the nature of the gospel, in making the change. We believe they did this with apostolic approval, but there is no apostolic command with regard to it on record.

The above illustrations, we think, suffice to justify the general principle, that a thing may be called "scriptural," if it is in harmony with the general teaching of the Word of God, even if we can not point to any direct mention of it in those sacred pages. Baptists certainly can not deny this principle, for they accept the practices mentioned above, as well as we. Their opposition to infant baptism is not itself scriptural, in the sense of being found in the Bible, for the New Testament contains not a single word of warning or disapproval with regard to it. Thus the silence of the Word of God cuts both ways. If the Baptist position is to be defended, it can be done only by showing that it is in harmony with the general teaching of the Holy Scriptures with regard to the nature and meaning of the sacrament of baptism.

Baptists and their sympathiers, however, come forward confidently on that basis, saying: "Infant baptism is clearly out of harmony with the nature of the rite. Baptism is set before us as a sign and seal of the forgiveness of sins, granted upon repentance and faith. It is the sign of regeneration, of conversion, of union with the death of Christ, and of rising in Him to newness of life: in short, of that entire inward spiritual change whereof we are made partakers by faith, and that issues in life eternal."

We shall not trouble them to produce proof texts for this statement. We accept it heartily. This being conceded, they continue: "Since baptism is such an ordinance,

and since infants are not yet capable of exercising saving faith, it follows that it must never be applied to them."

With this we do not agree. It being conceded that baptism is the sign and seal of a renewed relation to God through faith, the Baptists proceed to argue as if it were nothing more. We reply that this statement is a true statement, but not a complete one. Baptism is all that our friends have said, but we believe that it is also, in addition to this, the sign and seal of something else; namely, of a wider covenant relation to God, within which the grace of God commonly operates. Hence we believe that it may be, and ought to be, applied to all who have this wider relation to God, even if they have not yet advanced to the more intimate and personal saving relation to God through faith.

Can the same rite be both a seal of righteousness in a believer and a sign of the covenant relation in children not yet believers?

Certainly it can, and this can be clearly proved from Romans 4:11. Speaking of Abraham, St. Paul says:

> "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision."

The expression "the righteousness of the faith," means the same thing as the forgiveness of sins; as may be seen by comparing verses 5-9 of this same chapter. Hence, circumcision was to Abraham precisely what baptism is to the New Testament believer, namely, a sign of the forgiveness of sins, of his renewed and saving relation to God.

Since this is so, if Baptist principles are correct, it is clear that circumcision ought never to be applied to little children, who are not yet capable of exercising personal faith. Yet it was so applied by divine command. Isaac was circumcised the eighth day. Was he then already a believer?

To make this point very clear, let us recapitulate the reasoning of a Baptist, and indicate where we part company with him. The steps of his argument are as follows:

(1) A sacrament that signifies a saving relation to God based on faith must never be applied to those who are not yet capable of believing.

(2) Baptism is such a sacrament.

(3) Hence it must never be applied to those not yet capable of believing.

(4) Little children are not yet capable of believing.

(5) Baptism must not be applied to little children. Q. E. D.

Now substitute the word "circumcision" for the word "baptism" in the above. That it may be so substituted is shown by Romans 4:11. The argument now becomes a demonstration that infants must never be circumcised. This is a *reductio ad absurdum*, for God commanded to circumcise them. There must, therefore, be a mistake in the above reasoning somewhere.

The mistake is in the first proposition. To harmonize that with the Old Testament revelation, it should read as follows:

(1) A sacrament that signifies a saving relation to God based on faith must never be applied to those who are not yet capable of believing; unless they also are admitted to a special relation to God by virtue of the faith of their parents.

In this revised form, the proposition is true, and can be harmonized with infant baptism; **provided, the children of Christian parents do stand in such a special relation to God by virtue of the faith of their parents.**

We believe that they do, and we call such a special relation to God, "The Covenant Relation." That the children of believing parents stand in such a covenant relation to God we must now prove. To prove it, we lay down the following six propositions:

(1) Beginning with Abraham, God has had, and still has, in the world, a visible community in special covenant relations to Himself, within which and through which His redemptive purposes are accomplished.

(2) This covenant community has existed in three stages, or forms; namely, first, the patriarchal family; second, the Hebrew nation; third, the Christian church; but it is nevertheless one continuous covenant group.

(3) Faith is the basis of this covenant relation, and independent adults become members of this group in no other way.

(4) Children of members, in their capacity as such children, are members, without regard to their personal faith or regeneration, actual or presumptive, present or prospective.

(5) In the first and second stages, circumcision was the sign and seal of membership in this covenant group.

(6) In the New Testament dispensation, baptism is the sign and seal of such membership.

If these six propositions are scriptural, it can not be denied that infant baptism is scriptural; for it is only putting into practice the principles laid down in these six propositions. Let us take them up one by one.

(1) Beginning with Abraham, God has had, and still has, in the world, a visible community in special covenant relations to Himself, within which and through which His redemptive purposes are accomplished.

It is scarcely necessary to adduce scriptural proof of this first proposition. I do not know that it is denied by any Bible student, or how it could be denied; for the whole structure of the Bible rests upon this conception. The first eleven chapters are only the introduction to the Bible. The development which culminated in Jesus Christ and continues in the Christian church, took its start when God said to Abraham:

> "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house . . . and I will bless thee, and make thy name great . . . and be thou a blessing . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

God here creates a separated people, for the purpose of ultimately, through that people, blessing the whole world. That was a new thing. Individual faith and fellowship with God there had been before—we have only to think of Enoch and Noah—but there had been no group, no separated, covenanted, holy people: and it had been only too plainly demonstrated that a purely individual gospel will

not save the world. There must be a holy community, a separated group, a household of faith. Herein lies the immense significance of Abraham and his call from Ur of the Chaldees.

Our second proposition is:

(2) This covenant community has existed in three stages, or forms; namely, first, the patriarchal family; second, the Hebrew nation; third, the Christian church; but it is nevertheless one continuous covenant group.

Now we shall have to prove what we say, for there are some Bible students, especially the school represented by the Scofield Bible, who do not believe this proposition to be true. They will not hear of any unbroken continuity of the people of God in the Old and New Testaments. They believe that the church of Christ is a completely new group, not continuous with the covenant people of the Old Dispensation. They teach that the prophets had not at any time the church in view, that it was a mystery not revealed to them. The covenant people which began with Abraham they conceive to be something quite distinct from the church, and to be the seed of Abraham after the flesh, namely, the Jewish people. They believe that the continuous development of this covenant people is for a time suspended, because of unbelief, and that in the "interim" or the "parenthesis" in history thus produced the church has its day; but that sooner or later, with the conversions of the Jews, this parenthesis will come to an end, and the interrupted development of the covenant people will be resumed.

I do not know how infant baptism could be defended upon such principles; for if these views are correct, the covenant people that took its beginning with Abraham and the Christian church are two separate entities, discontinuous the one with the other, and no argument based upon the continuity of God's work can have any force.

Against such a conception, the Reformed theology has always held, and it seems to me with perfect justice, upon the basis of Holy Scripture, that the Christian church is not a brand new thing, but the third stage of the one continuous

people of God. Let us turn first to Galatians 3:8, and learn from the Apostle Paul that

> "the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed."

Since this was the gospel, all who accept this gospel are members of Abraham's family.

> "Know, therefore, that they that are of faith, the same are sons of Abraham" (vs. 7). "So, then, they that are of faith are blessed with the faithful Abraham" (vs. 9). "If ye are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise" (vs. 29).

Must we make a distinction between the covenant and the promise, alleging, as is sometimes done, that the covenant is national and the promise spiritual? By no means, for in Ephesians 2:11-13 we find them closely linked together, in the phrase: **"the covenants of the promise."**

The whole passage is most instructive:

> "Wherefore remember . . . that ye were at that time alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus ye that once were afar off are made nigh in the blood of Christ" (vss. 12, 13). "So, then, ye are no more strangers and sojourners, but ye are fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

Such language is meaningless unless there is one continuous covenant community, here called **the commonwealth of Israel** and **the household of God,** from which the Gentiles were at one time separated, and to which they were aliens, but of which believing Gentiles have become **fellow-heirs, fellow-citizens, fellow-members, and fellow-partakers.**

The same teaching is found in the Epistle to the Romans, under the figure of the olive tree, from which some branches were cut off, and into which other branches were grafted in. The branches cut off are the unbelieving Jews, and those grafted in are the believing Gentiles, but what is the olive tree itself, unless it be this continuous community, separating from the rest of mankind, within which God is perfecting His redemption?

It would take too long to go over the entire argument, for I should have to adduce most of the Old Testament ref-

erences in the New Testament writings, in order to point out how constantly they seize upon the glowing promises of the prophets, which, taken by themselves, refer only to the Jews, and claim them for the Christians. This is that "spiritualizing" of the prophecies to which some so seriously object, but which the church has learned from the best of all instructors in biblical exegesis, the inspired apostles.

Let us look, however, at one or two of the most prominent cases. The prophet Jeremiah, in a noble passage (31:31, sq.), says the days are coming when there shall be a new covenant **with the house of Israel.** He says specifically **with the house of Israel,** but the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews expounds this as the foretelling of the new dispensation. To him **the house of Israel** is identical with the Christian church. Again, the prophet Hosea, in the great "Lo-ammi" and "Lo-ruhamah" passages (Hosea 1:6; 2:23) addresses the people of Israel, and not the tribe of Judah, but the ten tribes, without any doubt. Yet both St. Paul (in Romans 9:25, 26) and St. Peter (in I Peter 2:10) apply his words to the Christians; and the former even proves from them the calling of the Gentiles—a truly amazing use of that text, and possible only to one deeply imbued with the idea of the unbroken continuity of God's people.

In spite, therefore, of all dissent to his proposition, it seems to me capable of abundant defense. Our liturgy is scriptural when it says: "The Lord said unto Abraham, and therefore to us." What was said to Abraham in relation to the covenant was also said to us, for, with humility and gratitude, and yet with firm confidence, we say: **"The covenant people? We are the covenant people!"**

The third proposition is this:

(3) Faith is the basis of this covenant relation, and independent adults become members of this group in no other way.

This requires no special proof; certainly not as against the Baptists and their sympathizers, who are constantly insisting on it. Had not Abraham believed God, against all human possibility, he could never have been heir to the

righteousness of faith, and had he not been justified, God could not have entered into covenant relations with him. Faith was, and ever must remain, the great thing that, on man's side, makes the covenant possible. One expression in our proposition perhaps requires explanation. I say that "independent adults" entered the covenant group in no other way than by the road of personal faith. Adults not reckoned as independent, such as wives and slaves, from the beginning were included without regard to personal faith, and in the New Testament there is at least one passage that implies the membership in the household of faith of certain adults without personal acceptance of the gospel. We shall come to that presently.

Our fourth proposition is this:

(4) The children of members, in their capacity as such children, without regard to their personal faith or regeneration, actual or presumptive, present or prospective, are members of the covenant group.

The proof of this is as follows:

(1) God says so.

> "I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee . . . to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee . . . and I will be their God."

Can we take this to be the natural seed, in view of the fact that we have just insisted that "those that are of faith, these are the children of Abraham"? Certainly we can. It means what it seems to mean, what it meant to Abraham, what it must mean in a primary sense,—and then it means more too, infinitely more; but what it means more does not cancel its primary meaning. God undertook to be the God of Abraham, and of Abraham's children.

This is not a promise to be their God **if they believed,** for then this part of the promise is meaningless; inasmuch as God will also be the God of those outside the covenant, if they believe. God means that Abraham's children, by virtue of the mere fact that they are Abraham's children, shall from birth be in covenant with Himself, that is, shall be members of that peculiar and highly privileged group which He has set apart for Himself from the rest of man-

kind; within which and through which He is to work out His redemptive program. To be sure, the said children may, in process of time, become "profane persons," as was Esau, and, despising their birthright, may then be cut off through unbelief from the olive tree: but unless and until that happens, they are God's children, in an especial sense under His loving care. Therefore He complains so bitterly of child sacrifice to Moloch among the Jews, saying: **"Thou hast slain my children"** (Ezekiel 16:20). They were God's children, and that not by virtue of creation, for no such statement is made about the children of the heathen, but by virtue of the covenant.

(2) Jesus Christ says so.

> "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for to such belongeth the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14).

It is not without reason that this precious text was already in the days of Tertullian an obstacle in the way of the opponents of infant baptism. With very strange exegesis he says: "Let them come then, . . . when they have become able to know Christ." That was precisely the attitude of the apostles, which moved Christ to indignation. They were quite willing that those children should come later, when they had grown up!

Hardly better is the exegesis of those who deny any reference to actual little children, and interpret the words of Jesus as referring only to child-like adults. Those of whom He was speaking were the actual little folks then before Him, when the apostles in their mistaken zeal had tried to drive away. Whatever secondary spiritual meaning the text may convey with regard to child-like adults, the primary reference is to those very children at that very time. Of them He says that the kingdom of God belongs to them. It was their kingdom, just as the United States is our country, because we were born in it and have never yet repudiated it. So it was with those children. They had been born members of the kingdom of God, and they had a right of access to the King, a right which the apostles wrongfully denied them. But he who belongs to the kingdom of God stands in a special relation to God, in the covenant relation.

(3) The Apostle Peter says so.

> "The promise is to you, and to your children, and to those that are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39).

Here we find three classes to whom pertains the promise of the covenant. Some would make us believe that there are only two classes, namely, believers and unbelievers, who may later become believers; but St. Peter has three: believers, their children, and unbelievers, who may later become believers. The promise belongs to the children, not as possible future believers, for then they are not in a separate class, then they are in the same boat precisely with the heathen; but just because, and only because, they are children of believers. It will continue to belong to them unless and until by unbelief they repudiate it. That the promise and the covenant can not be separated, the one from the other, we have already seen, on the basis of Ephesians 2:12. Those who have the promise are within the covenant. The promise is for the children of those in the covenant, therefore the children themselves are also within it.

(4) The Apostle Paul says so.

> "For the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband, and the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife; else were your children unclean, but now are they holy."

The meaning of "sanctified," or made holy, is here, of course, not "made holy in personal character." Such a thing could not possibly be asserted, either of the unbelieving party to a marriage or of the issue of a Christian marriage. It is the use of the word "holy" to which we are accustomed in such expressions as "holy vessels," "the holy city," "the holy temple," etc., namely, standing in a special relation to God, set aside for His use, acknowledged as His. Christians were, in the apostolic thought, such a holy people, as St. Peter says; appropriating to the church language used in the Old Testament of Israel: **"Ye are a holy nation."** Hence, the current word among them for designating themselves was "the saints," and this occurs in connections where all thought of freedom from sin is absent, and it is purely a technical term for what we should call

"Christians," — church-members, as in places like the following:

> "Peter came down to the saints at Lydda" (Acts 9:32). "When he had called the saints and widows" (Acts 9:41). "Many of the saints did I shut up in prison" (Acts 26:10). "Now concerning the collection for the saints" (I Corinthians 16:1).

Dr. Willis J. Beecher, in his book, *The Prophets and the Promise*, shows how this word developed as a technical expression, in the Old Testament, for the people who had received the promise. In taking over and claiming this designation, the apostolic church showed how saturated its thinking was with the consciousness of being the continuation of the Old Testament covenant body. Now, taking this meaning, and applying it to I Corinthians 7:14, it is not arbitrary to translate it as follows:

> "For the unbelieving husband is made a 'saint' by reason of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made a 'saint' by reason of her husband; else were your children outsiders, but now are they 'saints'."

Very strongly there comes out in this text the religious indivisibility of the family. If one principal member is within the circle of the covenant, and therefore a "saint," all the rest are, too. It is the same principle as that laid down by St. Paul in Romans 2:16:

> "for if the first-fruits be holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root be holy, so are the branches."

You can not, in early Christian thought, divide the family, having part of it within the covenant, and part outside.

This principle of the indivisibility of the family with regard to the church finds expression in the New Testament in those places where religion is spoken of as a family affair: the cases of the jailer at Philippi, Cornelius, Stephanas, Lydia, Onesiphorus, etc. My point is not that there must have been children in these families. The point is that such expressions as "Thou shalt be saved, and thy house"—"she was baptized and her household"—"he feared God with all his house," etc., could not occur if the conception of religion were purely individualistic; but involve

a method of thinking exactly in harmony with this verse in I Corinthians 7:14. We could not have a clearer or stronger assertion than the one of St. Paul in this verse, that children are members of the body of the "saints." This is the covenant group, the Christian church.

Our fifth and sixth propositions hardly require formal proof. They are:

(5) In the first and second stages, circumcision was the sign and seal of membership in this covenant group.

(6) In the Christian church baptism is the sign and seal of such membership.

Every one who has read the Bible knows that these two propositions are true, although not every one perceives the importance of the second, that one of the functions of baptism is to serve as a badge of membership in the covenant group. Baptists very commonly overlook this aspect of baptism. Fixing their eyes upon the inward and spiritual significance of the rite, as the sign and seal of regeneration, they reason as if this were its only significance; whereas it has also the outward and very important function of serving as a sign of membership in the church.

It is perhaps natural that this feature of baptism should make a less vivid impression upon the minds of people born and brought up in communities where practically every one is baptized; for in such communities this delimiting, differentiating, separating function of baptism is less in evidence. In non-Christian lands today it comes out with the same sharpness as in apostolic times. To be a Christian has an outward social significance in lands like Japan and India which it has not in America. Almost all public festivals in those lands are religious festivals, and religious customs with regard to eating and drinking, marriage, birth, death, in short, with regard to all the important relations of life, are so interwoven with the communal organization, that a Christian family which refuses to participate in such activities is thereby instantly and sharply set off from the rest of society. It becomes not only a foreign but also a very irritating element.

Hence, for social purposes, it becomes important to know definitely who is a Christian and who is not. No inward spiritual distinction is of any value here. There must be a definite act that constitutes a person a Christian, so that all may know it; something like wearing a uniform, raising aloft a banner, displaying a badge. That something is baptism. In a social sense, in those countries, people who are baptized are Christians, those not baptized are not Christians. Hence, it is a great event in a man's life when he is baptized. It creates at once a new set of relations, and forces all men to treat the baptized person in a new way. Being baptized makes infinitely more trouble than any amount of merely spiritual approach to Christianity. In countries like India and Japan, no one is greatly concerned over the doctrinal belief of another. A son or a daughter may say that he or she believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, and may pray or read the Bible at home. Father and mother are usually quite unconcerned about this, are perhaps rather inclined to be pleased with it, especially if, as often happens, this coincides with some improvement in the conduct of the said son or daughter. But let the young person propose to be baptized, and at once the storm breaks. Nothing of the kind can be tolerated, and if it takes place, it not infrequently leads to expulsion from the home and ostracism from all polite society. Mr. Gandhi is at present the idol of all India, and he may praise Jesus Christ to his heart's content; but all India would spit in his face tomorrow if he were baptized. So it is in our own country with the Jewish population. Rabbis may say what they like in praise of Jesus Christ without losing caste, so long as they are not baptized, but let them receive the rite, and it is all over. This was exactly the situation in the apostolic and sub-apostolic church. Christians were in those days a compact social group, with a remarkable degree of coherence and unity among themselves, and by the same token sharply differentiated from all the world besides. The mark of such separation was one thing—baptism.

This was also the function which circumcision performed in the Old Testament, as almost every reference to it proves. It is indeed true that there was circumcision also among the Egyptians and some other ancient nations. Just

as God took the already existing rainbow in the days of Noah and made it a sign of the covenant, so in the days of Abraham He took the already existing practice of circumcision and invested it with a new significance. Perhaps it first came to the notice of Abraham during his visit to Egypt. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* gives the following list of nations that practiced circumcision: "Hebrews, Arabians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Egyptians." All of these were descended from Abraham and Lot except the Egyptians. Among the Edomites, at least, it appears to have fallen into disuse, for when the Maccabeans annexed the Idumeans, they forced them to be circumcised. That the Canaanites were not circumcised, is clear from the story of Hamor, the prince of Shechem, and his relations to Dinah. In spite, therefore, of the prevalence of the act in some ancient tribes or nations, it remains true that, throughout the history of Israel, circumcision was the great delimiting, differentiating sign which separated them from the Gentiles, as being the covenant people.

Since circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New has thus closely parallel, if not identical functions, it is no empty phrase to say that baptism came in the place of circumcision. This is not because it is expressly so stated in the New Testament. In Colossians 2:3, St. Paul speaks of "the circumcision of Christ," and our liturgy understands this of baptism. Perhaps the exegesis is correct, perhaps not. It doesn't greatly matter, for the assertion that baptism has come in the place of circumcision does not rest upon one or two doubtful texts, but upon the nature of the case.

Circumcision has two aspects, or functions. It was the sign and seal of personal faith on the one hand, and of membership in the covenant group on the other. Baptism is the sign and seal of precisely the same things. "Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other." Baptism has come in the place of circumcision. Hence, if it was right to circumcise infants, it is right to baptize them.

We have now separately proved each one of our six propositions, except those that need no proof. Let us recapitulate:

(1) Beginning with Abraham, God established, and has since maintained, in the world, a covenant people.

(2) The Christian church is the present form of this covenant people, existing in unbroken continuity from the days of Abraham.

(3) Faith is the basis of this covenant relation, and independent adults enter it in no other way.

(4) Children of believers are members of this covenant group *ipso facto.*

(5) In the Old Testament period, circumcision was the sign and seal of membership in this covenant group.

(6) In the New Testament period, baptism is this sign and seal, superseding circumcision. It should be applied to all members, therefore, also to little children.

We believe that we have shown these propositions to be scriptural. If so, infant baptism is a scriptural practice; whether or no there was any direct apostolic instruction to baptize little children. There may have been, as Origen says there was; but if the early Christians began to baptize their little ones without such a command, spontaneously, nevertheless, since what they did was exactly in harmony with the scriptural teaching about the nature of baptism, and about the nature of infants and their standing in the kingdom of God, what they did was right, and ought to be continued by us.

We have now to pass to our third reason for maintaining infant baptism.

III. INFANT BAPTISM IS AN EDIFYING PRACTICE

If it had not been, it could not have survived and been cherished by Christian people the world over, through eighteen centuries of church history. It has been a great source of instruction and comfort, and will continue to be so, wherever it is rightly understood and reverently prac-

ticed. Let us briefly enumerate some of the things infant baptism does for the child, the parents, and the church.

() For the Child.

It is almost universally held among Protestants that baptism confers nothing upon the child which it did not already possess. In the prayer-book of the Church of England, indeed, there are expressions which suggest the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. This is due to the fact that the Roman Catholic leaven was never wholly purged away from the Anglican communion, but with due regard to the word "almost," the above statement will stand. Certainly the Reformed Churches acknowledge no change in the infant or in its status because of the act of baptism. The baby is the same when carried away from the ceremony as it was before, and it would be in the same relation to God and the church even if the ceremony were never performed.

Of what profit, then, is the baptism? Of great profit, in that the status of the baby as a member of God's covenant people is thereby publicly acknowledged and certified. Its value is of the same sort as the value of a public inauguration ceremony, a public marriage ceremony, or a public ceremony of graduation. All of these may be done in private, and may be perfectly valid if so done, but the public act lends to them a valuable act of acknowledgment and attestation.

This attestation is not merely human. Through the minister, acting as His representative, the Triune God Himself publicly acknowledges and receives this child as a member of the redeemed community. It is not only that the minister does something—God does something; as our liturgy beautifully states it:

> "When we are baptized into the name of the Father, God seals unto us His covenant of grace; when we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God assures us of our cleansing through the blood of Christ; and when we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God promises that He will dwell in us and sanctify us to be members of Christ."

Therefore the church, when the ceremony is over, gives thanks as follows (quoting from the older liturgy):

> "We thank and praise Thee, that Thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins."

This has sometimes given offense, as a dangerous approach to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, but it need not, if rightly understood. It is the redeemed and forgiven community that speaks, and if the infant now baptized is truly a member of that community, it of necessity shares in the forgiveness without which there could be no covenant people. If we believe that children are born wholly innocent—as taught by Pelagius—naturally infant baptism is meaningless; but if we accept the teaching of the Holy Scriptures that they are "by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Ephesians 2:3) then, in believing that they have been received into covenant with God, we must believe that God does not treat them in accordance with their actual condition, but extends to them His grace in Christ, which is forgiveness.

Those who deny or overlook this need of forgiveness on the part even of little children, either can have no infant baptism at all, or make of it a ceremony of dedication. The point is an old one. Dr. Shedd quotes St. Augustine as remarking:

> "A short time ago, when I was at Carthage, I heard the passing remark from some, that infants are not baptized for the forgiveness of sins, but as an act of consecration to Christ" (*History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. II, page 98, note).

We of the Reformed faith, however, recognizing that children are by nature sinful, rightly give thanks that this sinful state is not permitted to exclude them from the favor and grace of God, but that, even before the children are themselves conscious of it, God assures them that this need not hinder their coming unto Him. This is forgiveness, in an elementary form, to be sure, but real forgiveness for all that. Infant baptism is here true to the general nature of baptism, as a seal of the forgiveness of sins.

The baptized infant is therefore an attested and certified member of the church. In view of this fact, it is a pity that

the expression, "joining the church," should be so often heard among us, with reference to making confession of faith. It is in flat contradiction to the official teaching of the church. Our liturgy requires the parents to answer in the affirmative the following question:

> "Do you acknowledge that although our children are by nature sinful and guilty before God, they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore, *as members of His Church*, ought to be baptized?"

Children are baptized, not as non-members, to make them members, but because they are members. Why, then, do we speak of even baptized children as joining the church?

Infant baptism ought to be administered in such a way, with such attendant ceremonies and circumstances, as to impress upon all the children present this truth, that the church is not merely for grown-ups, but that it is their spiritual home also, of which they are members, and in which, as members, they have a part. To that end it would be very useful if there were special decorations, and special music, with a part taken by children's voices, etc., whenever there is infant baptism.

(2) For the Parents.

The first thing infant baptism does for the parents is to bring them face to face, personally, with their relation to God and His church. It does this at a particularly favorable time. When the dangers of pregnancy and child-birth have been safely passed, both the father and the mother, in normal cases, have a feeling of profound relief and gratitude. Their hearts are tender, especially if the child is the first-born. The practice of infant baptism requires them, at such a time, to come into personal contact with the minister, and this furnishes him with a precious opportunity for intimate conversation and instruction. It requires them to present the child publicly, and to renew their public vows as believers of the gospel, and as pledging themselves to faithfulness in Christian living. Finally, it impresses upon them most powerfully their responsibility for the training of the child by precept and example. No doubt there are

plenty of earnest Baptist fathers and mothers who feel all of this without the public ceremony, but it is in the nature of things that the impression is rendered more vivid and permanent by it. That is the function of a sacrament, and Christian experience abundantly confirms the efficacy of it in this sense.

Infant baptism and its accompanying instruction as to the relation of little children to the Saviour, is also a source of profound comfort when death robs the home. Even if the rite has not been applied, because death comes too early, the well-instructed parents know that the child was eligible, and that therefore the essence of the relation symbolized in baptism belonged to it. When the child is taken, therefore, it is as one of God's little ones that it leaves the arms of the stricken mother, and every time the form for infant baptism is read, there is a renewed and comforting assurance of this relation.

(3) For the Church.

The great service which infant baptism renders to the church is to preserve within it a lively sense of the great doctrine of sin. Baptism, even when confined to adults, does this. It symbolizes the need of cleansing through the blood of Christ. When applied to infants, it does this with added emphasis, since every one knows that the child is not yet stained with deliberate transgression. The emphasis, therefore, when infant baptism is rightly administered and accompanied by appropriate instruction, is strongly on the universality of the defilement, upon the inbred tendency, and upon the fact that, but for divine grace, this sinful state, even in its undeveloped form, would debar men from access to God. Thus to symbolize and reinforce great doctrinal truths, making it impossible to lose sight of them, is one of the great functions of the sacraments. The Lord's Supper has done this with regard to the doctrine of the atonement through the death of Christ; and infant baptism has done it with regard to the other fundamental doctrine of original sin.

In addition to this, infant baptism is a constant reminder to the church of its responsibility for the Christian nurture

of the children. This should be taken to heart much more than is usually the case, but even though imperfectly, this result has followed and does follow from the practice of infant baptism. The church is a party to the sacrament. Anciently there were sponsors, who shared with the parents responsibility for the Christian instruction of the baptized children. Among us, the entire church stands sponsor, and cannot escape responsibility for seeing to it that proper facilities are provided. It is strange, this being so, that in such churches as have special Sunday School rooms, these are usually monopolized by the adult classes, while the restless little ones are taught under the most unfavorable conditions. It should be otherwise, and would be, if the implications of infant baptism were more clearly understood and more faithfully lived up to by the churches.

To sum it all up: Infant baptism is a historic Christian practice, a truly scriptural practice, and a precious instrument in the hands of the church for instruction and edification. As such it should be vigilantly maintained, and faithfully practiced.

ALBERTUS PIETERS, V. D. M.

Holland, Michigan,
April 29th, 1929.

Pieters, Albertus,
1869-1955.
Why we baptize infants

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